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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study in which one specific form of follow-up, the action plan, was used to assess the effectiveness of a teachers' course with 15 German teachers of English and offers an evaluation of the plan's potential as a program evaluation instrument. The course was taught for 20, 1.5 hour sessions, in the mornings; afternoons were composed of a self-directed project, optional lectures, and local educational site visits. The action plan was introduced to participants on the last day of the course, with the objective that in 2-3 months, they would be asked to report on their progress toward the objectives they had formulated for the action plan. After 3 follow-up letters/postcards to all 15 students, 11 responses total, had been received. Analysis and comparison of action plans and responses revealed that action plans do seem to offer a feasible and economical way of gathering information that is of value to course organizers, especially regarding input to course design. The most difficult thing for the teachers was to find the time to adapt materials or to think through a different way of doing things. The action plans proved to be useful instruments for both evaluation and awareness-raising. (NAV)

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Participant Action Plans and the Evaluation of Teachers' Courses

Ian McGrath (IALS)

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PARTICIPANT ACTION PLANS AND THE EVALUATION OF TEACHERS' COURSES

Ian McGrath (IALS)

Abstract

Courses are intended - and expected - to bring about change in participants. What is distinctive about courses for teachers is that insofar as these changes are behavioural - related to skills development and classroom practice - they can only be satisfactorily observed once the course is over. If we are to assess the effectiveness of teachers' courses in these terms, follow-up is therefore necessary. The paper describes a study in which one specific form of follow-up, the action plan, was used, and offers an evaluation of its potential as a programme evaluation instrument.

1. Introduction

Teacher trainers, like any other teachers, are change agents. That is, they are expected to bring about changes in those they teach: changes in terms of knowledge or skill, awareness or attitude. It may be possible to observe certain types of change during a course (and tests and examinations are designed to do just this). However, some of the changes that trainers might wish to see taking place in teachers relate to teaching practices - to things being done which were not done before the course or to things being done better - and although it may be possible to observe an increase in skill during a course (e.g. as a result of microteaching practice) there is no guarantee that this will carry over to the individual's own teaching context or that new ideas will be implemented.

Despite what would seem to be a logical imperative, a recent survey of 31 UK institutions offering a total of 110 in-service courses for language teachers (McGrath, forthcoming) found very little evidence of systematic attempts to carry out post-course evaluation. There are no doubt a number of reasons for this. Alderson (1985), for instance, refers to logistic, methodological and interpretational difficulties. Nevertheless, given the importance of establishing longer-term effects, such difficulties should not deter us from at least trying to carry out some form of post-course evaluation - and exploring methods of doing so.

Evidence from the survey referred to above suggests that the institutions who attempt post-course evaluation tend to obtain their data in one or more of the following ways: through questionnaires sent to participants some months after the end of the course; from sponsors' reports on the participants or containing feedback from the participants; and from visits to the participants' home country and interviews, group discussion and observation there. In one rare account from a different context, trainers carried out follow-up visits to a sample of participants during which they not only videorecorded classes but also attempted to obtain a measure of comparison by interviewing and recording classes of participants' colleagues (Ward, Barr, Chai, Hua, Kong and Lu 1995).

A rather different approach is described by Alderson (op.cit.). Alderson's 'implementation plan' requires participants on a 10-week course to complete 'a personal plan of action for further ... curriculum development' (1985: 148). This is followed up some months later. Estaire (1993) indicates how action plans can be utilised during a course to encourage and assess take-up from specific sessions. Neither provides a documented account of results.

What follows is a description of a systematic attempt to use participant action plans in programme evaluation and a consideration of the possible benefits and limitations of this procedure.

2. The Context

In October 1994, 15 teachers and teacher-trainers from Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein attended a 2-week tailor-made refresher course at the Institute for Applied Language Studies, University of Edinburgh. There

was a good mix of males (6) and females (9) and all were very experienced, the average age being about 40. The basic timetable consisted of 20 x 1½-hour sessions, taught in the mornings. There were workshops on language through literature, drama activities for ELT, teaching mixed levels and developing learning independence; three sessions on the methodology of in-service training; culturally-oriented lectures; workshops on language awareness (e.g. political correctness); and a session on self-evaluation. Afternoons were taken up by self-directed project work (prepared for and followed up in morning sessions), optional lectures, and a visit to Moray House Institute of Education. Although I was the Course Director and handled 14 of the 20 morning slots, 6 other staff were involved, each contributing one lecture or workshop.

I will restrict myself to these few brief details because the paper is not so much concerned with the course itself as with the way in which it was evaluated.

3. The Study

3.1 Objectives

The course was evaluated formally primarily by means of what will be referred to as participant action plans (see 3.2, below). This was the first time that I had used action plans for evaluative purposes, and the intention was not only to obtain participant feedback on the course but also to assess the potential contribution to programme evaluation of this particular data collection instrument.

3.2 The action plan

The idea of action plans was introduced to participants on the last day of the course. They were first taken through page 1 of the handout (below) and asked to complete page 2. The completed forms were then photocopied and the originals given back to the participants. They were told that in two or three months' time they would be asked to report on their progress towards the objectives they had formulated for the action plan.

ACTION PLANS

What is an action plan ?

It's basically a set of resolutions: what you will DO as a result of an experience, in this case a course. DOING may mean discussing with colleagues some of the ideas you've been exposed to; trying out something new in the classroom; reading; or something else. You decide what actions you want to take.

Why make an action plan ?

An action plan is a kind of bridge between theory and practice or idea and implementation. Before you can make an action plan, you will need to go through a process of review and evaluation. It goes without saying that this is valuable in itself, but if it then leads to concrete decisions about what you will DO, there is even more chance that you will apply something of what you have learned.

What are the criteria for an action plan ?

Good action plans distinguish clearly between short- and long-term goals. The goals are specified in concrete terms, and they are realisable.

Now turn over the page and try to formulate at least three concrete, realisable goals which derive in some way from your experience in Edinburgh.

Action plan, page 1: briefing notes

MY ACTION PLAN

I will definitely ...

1.

2.

3.

I also hope to ...

4.

5.

6.

NAME ..... DATE .....

ADDRESS .....

.....

.....

Action plan, page 2 form for completion

3.3 Follow-up 1

A follow-up letter was sent out in December, some two months after the end of the course (Appendix 1). It combined Christmas/New Year greetings with an enquiry concerning progress with the points in the individual's action plan, a copy of which was enclosed with the letter. The letter crossed with a handful of seasonal greetings from Germany. No reference was made in any of these to the action plan.

In early February I received one letter responding directly to the issues raised in mine, and waited for the others.

By the third week in February I was feeling somewhat despondent and mentioned this to one of my colleagues. He suggested a number of reasons for participants' failure to reply (e.g. the course had been very short; some effects may only manifest themselves after a considerable period of time, if at all; participants might be embarrassed if they had nothing to report). The conversation made me think. It also prompted me to write another standard letter, at the end of February.

3.4 Follow-up 2

In the second letter (Appendix 2) I summarised the conversation with my colleague and included an extract from the one reply I had received. Slightly personalised versions of the standard letter were sent to the people who had written to me at Christmas. I also wrote back to the one participant who had replied to my letter.

My second attempt produced five replies within two weeks or so (four letters and one card, the latter promising a fuller response in due course - which never actually arrived). Only two of these were from

people who had written to me at Christmas. One of my letters came back: 'return to sender, address unknown'. The number of the house turned out to have been wrong; the letter was sent out again, and a faxed reply was received almost immediately. By the end of March, three more responses had arrived and one more, written during the Easter holidays, at the end of April. This gave me a total of ten, two-thirds of the group.

3.5 Follow-up 3

What else could I do to get the others to reply? Well, I could have written another letter or I could have telephoned, but both of these approaches seemed rather too pushy.

I decided on a picture postcard: a photo of Edinburgh on one side and "Hope to hear from you some time!" on the other. The five postcards went out in late June, just before the summer holidays. I received one response - also on a postcard - in early November, roughly a year after the end of the course and ten months after the first follow-up.

4. Data Analysis

The data thus fell into two categories: the 15 action plans, and the 11 responses to my letters and postcard concerning the action plans. With the exception of the two postcards, responses were quite long, the majority occupying one typed page of A4, and the handwritten responses ranging from two to four pages in length.

The plans were scrutinised for specific reference to topics treated during the course; other points were also listed, grouped and categorised.

The letters and cards sent by participants in response to my letters were first analysed for the following:

- evidence that action had been taken on the action points formulated at the end of the course
- evidence of any other effects of the course.

Some respondents do refer directly and systematically to the points in their action plan; some refer to certain points but not others; and the minority write in such general terms that it is impossible to relate their comments directly to specific action points.

The quantified results related to reported action should therefore be taken as only approximations of reality and as true only for the time at which these soundings were taken. In due course, participants may decide (or be able) to pursue ideas they had not hitherto explored.

5. Results

5.1 Data Analysis Stage 1: The action plans

Topic areas had been selected (and approved by the course leader) on the assumption that they would be of interest to a well-experienced group. Nevertheless, given the variety of experience and teaching contexts within the group it was unlikely that any one topic would appeal equally to everyone, and a range of course topics figured in the action plans, as indicated in Table 1, below. Items 1-6 in the table were named timetable sessions (these constitute, in fact, all the specific methodology sessions). Item 7 makes reference to a special session on the final day which incorporated a demonstration of the Silent Way; item 8 to activities on the first day and at the start of many other sessions.

Table 1: Content areas featured in course and figuring in action plans (n = 15)

1. developing learner independence	6

2. the use of literature in language teaching	5
3. drama techniques in language teaching	5
4. teaching mixed levels	4
5. project work	3
6. self-evaluation	2
7. new approaches (incl. work with Cuisenaire rods)	2
8. ice breakers	2

It is possible that more than the numbers indicated found these sessions interesting or of some value; what the action plans indicate, however, is that at the point the course ended these particular individuals felt sufficiently stimulated to want to do something about this interest. In this sense, the action plan goes beyond the usual kind of end-of-course questionnaire which merely asks whether participants find particular sessions interesting or valuable or which sessions they have found most valuable.

Table 2, below, relates to more general or less predictable effects of the course.

Table 2: Action plan objectives related less directly to course content

1. change way of teaching/approach	4
2. use materials given	2
3. use materials collected	1
4. study books bought	1
5. share with colleagues	6
6. stay in contact with group	3
7. maintain connections with Edinburgh	2
8. pursue interest in dyslexia	2
9. pursue interest in comparing paintings and poems	1
10.teach folkdances to students	1
11.incorporate ideas in own publications	1
12.not continue to do every kind of non-teaching job	1

Objectives 1-4 differ from those in Table 1 in that, though related to pedagogical concerns, they are more general. 'Change way of teaching/approach' (1) includes both general statements such as 'be more creative' and very specific intentions, such as making use of a specific (but unspecified) technique or getting students to talk more. 'Use materials collected' (3) refers to materials collected in the course of individual project work.

The second subgroup of objectives, 5-7, are interpersonal. 'Share with colleagues' (5) points to the possible spread of ideas beyond their immediate recipients, an important consideration in the case of participants who are teachers and teacher trainers and therefore another effect that can only be evaluated some time after the course is over. 'Stay in contact with the group' (6) would seem to be one indicator of the cohesiveness of the group, which has in fact met on at least one occasion since the course.

The third subgroup, 8-12, relate to personal objectives only tangentially (if at all) related to course content. Project work (see Table 1) was an opportunity for participants to pursue existing interests (dyslexia (8) in one case; comparison of poems and paintings as teaching material (9) in another); other interests (folkdances, 10) or personal resolutions (11-12) appear to have been stimulated by the course itself.

5.2 Data Analysis Stage 2: Comparison of action plans and reports on these

Analysis of the action plans proved much more difficult than would have been the case if (a) each individual's starting point had been the same (b) they had been responding to a standard proforma.

Given these two built-in variables, the size of the total sample and the lack of information provided in several of the responses, results are numerically speaking very inconclusive.

The results are presented in the same order as those for in Table 1.

Table 3: Number of participants taking action on specific objectives related to course content

Objective	Action	
	planned	taken
• developing learner independence	6	3
• the use of literature in language teaching	5	1
• drama techniques in language teaching	5	1
• teaching mixed levels	4	0
• project work	3	0
• self-evaluation	2	1
• new approaches (incl. work with Cuisenaire rods)	2	1
• ice breakers	2	2

Table 4: Number of participants taking action on objectives less directly related to course content.

Objective	Action	
	planned	taken
• change way of teaching/approach	4	3

• use materials given	2	1
• use materials collected	1	0
• study books bought	1	0
• share with colleagues	6	1
• stay in contact with group	3	0
• maintain connections with Edinburgh	2	0
• pursue interest in dyslexia	2	1
• pursue interest in comparing paintings and poems	1	0
• teach folkdances to students	1	0
• incorporate ideas in own publications	1	1
• not continue to do every kind of non-teaching job	1	1

Based on participants' self-reports, there is then some quantitative evidence that action was taken in each of the three categories of objective. If one also draws on qualitative data - what respondents actually say in their letters - there seems reason to suppose that these figures are an under-representation of action in progress/ potential action. For instance, in relation to the teaching of mixed levels in Table 4 on which no action appears to have been taken, Respondent D writes: 'I find myself more prepared to care for the needs of the "differently gifted"'. Project work, being a general category, may have manifested itself in action in any one of a number of ways; there is certainly some overlap between this and the more personal objectives included in Table 6. Self-evaluation, similarly, is a rather general category and, in a sense, underpins the whole enterprise. Several respondents comment specifically on this:

> 'I haven't done any thorough self-evaluation though it's in the back of my head and I seem to realize the mistakes I do over and over again and to look at them more objectively' (E)
>
> 'In my own courses I'm actually just beginning to work a lot more with different forms of evaluation' (F - a trainer)
>
> 'As I knew your letter would come - I hadn't expected it as soon as this though - I had already tried to watch myself a bit more closely in my teaching behaviour' (I).

In connection with the objectives expressed in Tables 4 and 5, there are comments on postponed meetings with colleagues; there are also several interesting references to changes in teaching approach:

> 'by now I hope I have understood that I can't become an entirely new teacher within a fortnight, that this is a slow process which will take a long time, which can only be done in small steps and will perhaps never be fully completed. What I have already started to do is trying to provide phases in exercises which are less teacher-centred' (I)
>
> 'Even before the course ... terms such as learner independence ... were the rage in this part of the world. I had heard of these and read about them, even used them in my classes. Owing to your course,

however, it has become clear to me that they must play an even more dominant role than I had thought ... As a result ... I have been constantly on the look-out for ways and means to bring about more learner independence' ...[goes on to illustrate this in relation to his language classes]

'While working with probationary teachers in my seminars, too, I have given prominence to learner independence by making them draw on their considerable experience and having them discuss things amongst themselves before I feed in additional material and ideas. We find this very satisfactory' (B - a trainer)

Similarly:

'Both target groups [school pupils and trainees] showed their spontaneous appreciation of my somewhat different teaching approaches after my return to school and to the seminar.... All in all, those two weeks gave me a new impetus, which is still evident, I guess. I found out that I tend to employ more student-oriented methods now. (Motto: "Let them discover things ... I'll help them" rather than "That's the way it is. Got the message ?"). I had always thought that these methods would be rather time-consuming ... but they are not, if they are well dosed ... I think that's the secret of successful teaching - it's the mixture or better combination of the traditional (which wasn't that bad if you left out the extremes) and the new. Nothing is more harmful and demotivating than routine and patterns' (C - a trainer)

5.3 Data Analysis Stage 3: Explanations and other comments

At this stage of the analysis, two questions arose:

1. Why had certain action points not been implemented: was this an individual matter (were some participants simply less active than others) or was it something to do with the nature of the action point, the way this had been formulated, or the level of priority assigned to it ?

2. Why had only one person responded to the first letter? To what extent were the hypotheses expressed in the second letter correct (bad timing; longer period necessary for implementation or for effects to become apparent; unrealistic expectations concerning participants' sense of responsibility)?

5.3.1 Non-implementation of action points

Analysis of self-reported individual action (Table 7, below) indicates that the majority of participants responding to the follow-up have achieved a proportion of the objectives they set for themselves. Where they have not, this appears to have been for reasons beyond their control (e.g. postponement of meetings with colleagues); lack of opportunity (action points which relate to more distant future or syllabus areas do not lend themselves to use of specific ideas); changed awareness (realisation that planned actions were not appropriate); in some cases, personal problems also loom large.

In Table 5, below, participants responding by letter are referred to as LA, LB, etc.; those who sent postcards as PJ and PK. Column 2 indicates the number of points on which action has reportedly been taken, figures in brackets being the number of points originally formulated by each individual. Action points not referred to in the response are noted under NO REF.

Table 5: Individual implementation of action plans

	Action	No ref.	No action	Explanation/comment
LA	4 (5)	1		
LB	1 (3)	2		

LC	3 (3)			but used material his way
LD	3 (6)	2		
LE	1 (6)		1	2 meetings cancelled, 'in my mind to ...' do certain things
LF	2 (4)			remaining objectives felt to be inappropriate
LG	0 (6)	6		personal problems; also new to training
LH	2 (4)	2		
LI	2 (6)	2	2	one ref. to future plan; reality of teaching context makes implementation problematic
PJ	(2)	2		
PK	(2)	2		

A further analysis, this time of the distribution of points across the two sections of the action plan (I will definitely .../I also hope to ...) showed no pattern either in relation to the inclusion of specific, short-term points under the first section and more general, long-term objectives under the second or in relation to action actually taken. As will be clear from Table 5, most participants expressed fewer than the 'maximum' of 6 objectives; two wrote nothing under 'I also hope to ...'. For further comment on this, see **Conclusions**.

5.3.2 Non-immediate response

Several respondents mentioned how busy they had been. Sometimes the pressures appear to be a combination of the personal and professional:

> 'three lively children, a sweet old granny, a house, a garden, a dainty cat and a job don't allow much time for self-evaluation' (H)

In other cases, the pressures of work are overwhelming:

> (school, seminar [duties in connection with training course], night class, private tuition, work for a publisher, and just started a computer course) 'when your letter arrived I was up to my neck in it... I find that my usual daily routine looks as follows: getting up, WORK, feeling terribly tired, going to bed' (D)

One person had actually started to reply but ' I still wanted to add and correct something. I was afraid you might find it too superficial'. She goes on: 'I even tried to phone you to stop you worrying ... Maybe we are just worried that we can't fulfil your expectations' (H).

Another points out that it takes time to assess the nature of the impact of a course:

> 'Maybe the reason for not responding earlier could be found in the fact that you need time to find out whether your teaching approaches, behaviour, etc have really changed' (C)

See also comments 3.1-3.5 in Appendix 3.

The reports also yield other information of both a more specific and a more general nature, among which are comments on the value of the action plan itself. This, it will be recalled, was referred to specifically in the first letter, and from my point of view was the primary objective for the whole study.

5.3.3 The action plan

Three respondents commented directly on the action plan itself and a fourth on its implicit effect in getting him to evaluate more than he might have otherwise.

> 'I really am grateful for the action plan you made us fill in. It definitely helped me to be more decisive in telling people what I'm willing and what I'm no longer willing to do. Which led to the fact that two of my colleagues took over jobs I'd been doing. I realise that I have again given in to the daily routine, though' (A).

She continues:

> 'My answer may be too late for your purposes, I'm afraid, but for me it turns out to be just in time. Evidently it is worth looking at one's action plans from time to time.'

The second writes:

> 'I liked the idea of the action plan because it forces you to make your ideas more obliging (?) ... [and] to ask again some weeks later if the planned action has already taken place or why it hasn't' (F)

And the third wonders whether it might not be a good idea to repeat the process a year on:

> As a short-term review, I daresay, my way of approaching subjects both with my students and trainee teachers has changed considerably ... Whether it will remain like this has to be seen and re-examined after, say, a year or so. (I'll gladly give you another report then.)' (C)

6. Conclusion: The value of action plans

On the basis of the evidence gained from the first stage of analysis, action plans do seem to offer a feasible and economical way of gathering information that is of value to course organisers, especially as input to the design of a course for a similar group. It would be possible to draw the line at this stage, without further systematic follow-up. This would, however, leave us as ignorant as we normally are about what effects - if any - are triggered in course participants. Moreover, participants would not feel the kind of positive pressure that some mention to go on evaluating themselves.

One of the strongest impressions left by reading participants' responses to the follow-up is that the pressures on teachers/trainers are such that although they may be able to slot certain new ideas into their everyday teaching (App.3: 3.10), it may be extremely difficult for them to find the time to adapt materials or to think through a different way of doing things. Despite this, there are signs that the process of adaptation has taken place or is taking place and that, in some cases, the effects of the course may prove quite long-lasting.

These positive outcomes notwithstanding, the study has shown that to obtain the follow-up data that makes more thorough evaluation possible requires a good deal of persistence. Moreover, even when data has been obtained (and this may well be tantalisingly incomplete), the process of data-analysis is time-consuming and the findings too various to be generalisable.

On balance, the gains seem to me to be worth the effort involved. In concrete terms the gains take the form of increased awareness of what participants take from a course and the obstacles that stand in the way of implementation. In asking - as we normally do - about the success or otherwise of a course as a whole, we may be asking the wrong question; we perhaps ought to be looking more carefully at the effect on individuals in relation to their personal/professional agendas (as well as that of the course provider, and, in the case of sponsored groups, that of the sponsor). There is, in addition, the potential value to participants of

continuing contact with the providing institution. Referring to post-course questionnaires, Alderson (1985) notes that they are a sign of 'caring'. This dimension of caring on the one hand and the very individual nature of the information received from participants may mean that the action plan is probably as close as we can get to 'participant sensitive' programme evaluation.

7. Issues

Although the study suggests that participant action plans may prove a useful instrument for both evaluation and awareness-raising, it also prompts consideration of a number of issues, practical and theoretical.

1. *Importance of negotiation of action plans*: within the framework described by Alderson (1985), action plans are negotiated with participants, who are asked to predict any possible difficulties of implementation and consider how these might be overcome. The objective, as is obvious, is that the action points should be as feasible as possible, and the assumption is that this is more likely if there has been prior reflection and discussion. On short courses, when new ideas may be introduced as late as the penultimate day, it may be difficult to find an appropriate time for the kind of negotiation that might be desirable, but equally the range of choices open to participants may be more restricted and decisions may therefore prove easier. In this case, participants were simply taken through the rationale for the action plan and then left to their own devices. It was hoped that the distinction between 'I will definitely ...' and 'I hope to ...' would serve a purpose similar to that of negotiation in the Alderson model; in the event this distinction seems to have been largely ignored. The results do not suggest that this was significant.

Two modifications to the procedure adopted may be worth considering. For instance, once individuals have formulated action points in draft form, these could be discussed with others in the group. This would not only reduce the likelihood of unrealistic objectives being put forward, it would also allow for the possibility of cooperative decisions, which might make subsequent exchanges on progress more likely and follow-up more streamlined. The proforma might also be redesigned to make data analysis rather easier. One possibility is shown below (a foolscap layout would be preferable). Note that a date is required. This would encourage participants to think in terms of actions achievable in the short term; it would also be an indicator as to an appropriate point at which to follow up.

ACTION POINT	ACT BY	*Yes* (✓)	COMMENT	*No* - REASON?

Columns to the right of the 'act by' date would be completed by the participant and constitute a progress report to the evaluator.

2. *Timing of follow-up*: There are perhaps two issues here, one being the practical problem of selecting a time for follow-up which would not be obviously inappropriate (e.g. an exam or report-writing period) - the 'act by' dates would be a guide here; the other being the length of time needed for gestation, for reflection to be translated into action, if action is what is expected. Certain kinds of change may not take place for several months or even years; others (practical ideas) might be implemented immediately. This implies the need for a longitudinal study continuing well beyond the period of the study described here. In such a case, it would obviously be desirable to combine individual contact by letter with other forms of contact (e.g. a newsletter, follow-up meeting with whole group, if this is possible). Apart from fulfilling an evaluative function, such contact would encourage the exchange of experiences and might well stimulate further, new action.

3. *The value of follow-up for participants*: Does follow-up prompt action that would not otherwise take place? This particular question was not an explicit focus of the study, but there is some evidence that it may be a factor worth exploring.

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4. *Reliability of self-reports and validity of this report*: In general, we do well to be a little cautious about accepting self-reports (in questionnaires, interviews or action plans) at face-value, especially when there is a possibility of loss of face for participant or tutor. In this particular case, although there is no reason to doubt that participants are telling the truth, and although nothing appears to hang on admissions that actions have not yet been taken, affective factors may still play a part. Whereas some respondents cite factors beyond their control as a reason for late replies or non-action (Appendix 3: 3.2, 3.4), 'face' may be a factor in other cases (see, e.g. H's explanation (in 5.3.2) of her delayed response) and this may have been a consideration for those participants who did not make a return.

The next step in the study will be to send this account to participants in order to ensure that it represents as accurately as possible their interpretations as well as my own. This would also be an appropriate point, obviously, to enquire what actions, if any, have been taken since the last soundings were taken and thereby gain some insight into the time required for innovations to be implemented - and their chances of taking root.

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APPENDIX 1: Letter 1

[LOGO]

[RETYPED]

December 18, 1994

Dear

This comes with the hope that all has been well since your return home and with a festive greeting:

May your Christmas be merry
and your New Year very ...!

Between the sleighing and the schnappsing (or the local equivalent) you might be thinking about your New Year's Resolutions. Which might lead you to think about previous good resolutions, including those that you formulated, with due care and consideration, on the last morning of the course in Edinburgh. Just in case you've forgotten what they were, but still vaguely remember being in Edinburgh (oh yes, sitting out in the garden of the Pear Tree on a balmy (?) October evening, the country dancing, the ghost walk, the pub quiz), I'm enclosing a copy of your ACTION PLAN, together with some light reading for you, your friends or your students [brochures].

People often leave courses feeling rather euphoric, and after the 24-hour-a-day course that you created for yourselves, that would have been entirely appropriate. However, the big question is whether, after this interval, you feel that the course has had any professional impact - that is, has made an appreciable difference to what you know or what you do or how you think. This is the big or broad question; the narrower one is whether you have made any progress as far as your Action Plan is concerned.

You may find it useful to spend a little time at this stage reflecting on these questions (echoes of the session on Self-Evaluation); if you could reflect on paper - and send that paper to me, that would be very helpful for my purposes in my institutional role (course evaluation and self-evaluation). I think I told you during my self-introduction at the beginning of the course that I'm doing a doctorate in the area of Evaluation (of in-service courses for teachers) and action plans are one of the evaluation measures that I deal with in the thesis, so any comments that you might wish to add on to the value or otherwise of action plans would be doubly appreciated!

I hope to hear from you - and, indeed, to see you again at some point, perhaps on your territory next time.

With best wishes,

Ian McGrath
Development Coordinator
Teacher Evaluation

APPENDIX 2: Letter 2

[LOGO]

[RETYPED]

February 28, 1995

Dear

Please forgive another 'standard' letter.

I thought you might be interested in a conversation I had last week with one of my colleagues. I said that I feel a little disappointed that so far I've only had one response to my letter to your group asking about progress in relation to your action plans, and added that my timing had probably been wrong, that you were all too busy enjoying yourselves to pay much notice when my letter arrived - or too busy preparing for the new term.

He suggested that there might be another, quite different reason, that you all feel rather embarrassed at having little or nothing to report. Embarrassed because you feel you should have done more, or embarrassed on my account, because I might think that the course has been unsuccessful if nothing happens as a result.

He went on to point out that you were here for only two weeks. This was a very short time in which to achieve anything significant and that, in any case, the effects of educational (as opposed to training courses) may not manifest themselves in concrete terms for some time, if at all. In other words, perhaps I was expecting too much. He also implied that two weeks was too short a time in which to establish the kind of relationship that induces people to respond to requests of this kind out of a sense of loyalty or responsibility. I don't accept this point, but I have scant evidence with which to refute it.

I mentioned that I have had one response and it bears out to some extent my colleague's speculations. 'I'm sure the writer won't mind if a quote a few sections from the letter:

> As I know your letter would come - I hadn't expected it as soon as this, though - I had already tried to watch myself a bit more closely in my teaching behaviour, and was somewhat disappointed.
>
> ... by now I hope I have understood that I can't become an entirely new teacher within a fortnight, that this is a slow process which will take a long time, which can only be done in small steps and will perhaps never be fully completed. What I have already started to do is trying to provide phases in exercises which are less teacher-centred, and I am trying to use drama-techniques in the teaching of literature.
>
> ... upon reflection I think I profited from my course at your institute more than I thought and in a different way, being made more prepared to reflect what I'm doing and how I could change my teaching habits.

As you will have gathered, I would very much like to hear from you, to confirm or disconfirm the ideas expressed in the earlier part of this letter. My impression was that you were an unusually well motivated group. What actually happened when you got back home?

Very best wishes,

Ian McGrath

APPENDIX 3 : Further extracts from participant responses to follow-up

Comments on non-(immediate) response:

3.1 'Now that I know I'm not the only one being delayed in response I don't feel so bad' (i.e. second letter stimulated response) (E)

3.2 'back home I am so absorbed in everyday routine and tasks that there is no time left ... The course hasn't been unsuccessful nor have I been too lazy. Teaching obligations and duties leave little or no time for extras. In my opinion it's a general deplorable state of affairs. But that won't refrain me from attending courses again as they do make an appreciable difference to me before and after the course' (E)

3.3 (problems with elderly parents) 'I try to work hard but I never have the chance to look inside me' (G)

3.4 'please don't take our non-reactions personally. Trying to understand the four reasons [reference to my second letter] you are on the right track, but there is more to it ... 'too busy enjoying ourselves' - you must be kidding! e.g. I have got to write more than 200 school-reports (1 page each!!!) twice a year. And we do individual [?] at school - fun, but an enormous amount of work. Many of us feel terribly exhausted. (J)

3.5 'I have found it hard to reflect on the impact the course in Edinburgh had on my teaching habits although I feel I profited a lot from it' (A)

Further insights into the effect of course process/ Ps' feelings during course

3.6 (led to awareness of own language difficulties) 'I forgot to keep on learning English while I was teaching' and now feels that she is reduced to the productive level of her own students; this affected her participation in the course (G)

Miscellaneous effects of the course

3.7 (It made me) 'feel more confident that I am on the right way ... to find out that my aims of teaching are right' (G)

3.8 'the mere fact that I attended this course had a general positive effect on me and my way of teaching. It restored much of my initial enthusiasms, which had begun to slumber under years of having to teach English to children who still have difficulty in mastering their mother tongue' (H)

3.9 'All in all, I can say that ... I've spent more time to prepare tasks for the pupils which don't involve me as a teacher but as a guide and general helper' (D)

310 'brought a lot of good ideas back home which I eagerly put into practice without the least delay' (H)

3.11 'Personally, I profited far more from the way and skill you structured and presented your "input" than from the content itself. Surprised ?' (K)

3.12 'I have used some of the material you have given us, but I did not try to imitate you or your approaches' (C)

3.13 'profited more than I thought and in a different way, being more prepared to reflect [on] what I'm doing and how I could change my teaching habits' (I)